

## Tangerine Strands

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The little girl and boy were screaming.

Not the bad screaming.

Not *Mia's* screaming.

Lucretia stood in the outer schoolyard, looking through the fence that separated her from the scene of the crime she had created two months prior. Of all the kids packed into the limited pen designated for kindergarten students, her eyes and ears couldn't help but track the running, laughing—*For now*, she thought—screaming little girl and boy, engaged in the age-old interplay: the fluttering of the little girl's long hair; the little boy's outstretched hand; the former barely outrunning the latter, whether by choice or biology, laughing, screaming, most times out of exhilaration, sometimes because a primitive thought told her she was in genuine danger; the way the invisibly tethered pair navigated the other children, who were merely sitting ducks oblivious to the fast-paced game of tandem sparrows; the little boy finding a latent gear, accelerating, reaching with a clawed hand, closer, closer, closer; the little girl abruptly turning to avoid his fingers; the chase slowing down—*this* time—to recover for an encore, or dying altogether, the dangerous game saved for something as distant as another day, or as close as the next recess.

And outside of this customary exchange, outside of this playground within a playground, Lucretia felt relief, for the little girl and boy had yet again successfully avoided recreating the history that had taken place in there.

She and Mia's history.

A history she had forgotten until last week.

Lucretia had looked forward to the first day of school. Her mother had dropped her off at the side of the building, wished her good luck on her first day of school, and drove away to the job that

paid their rent. Mia's mother, on the other hand... well, if she had work, she had clearly called in sick so as to protect her daughter from Lucretia.

It was in the gymnasium, where the buzzing student body waited to be assigned their new teachers, that Lucretia had felt the summer's sunburns in her gut, the summer's scraped knees all over her body, for she had seen for the first time how and in what condition Mia had spent *her* summer—thanks to that single moment in June.

Thanks to Lucretia.

The little girl and boy were screaming again.

Not the bad screaming.

Not *Mia's* screaming.

*Not yet*, Lucretia thought.

She looked away from the potential violence, and focussed on the one obstacle she would need to overcome if now was indeed the time to do what she hadn't any real courage to do. But when the obsidian eyes of Ms. Jackson, perched atop the steps leading to Lucretia's assigned door, met hers, she panicked, resorting to blindly surveying the vast schoolyard available to her.

She knew her new world by heart: the field that was home to two continental versions of football, haloed by quintuplet tracks; faded baseball diamond; fully-loaded play area—just some of the perks of becoming a full-day student in the first grade.

The perks, however, did nothing to perk her up.

Everyone was out here, relishing their twenty minutes outside the stifling classrooms, trying to capture as much of the lingering dog days as possible. Everyone who stole glances of Mia, who never saw, but must have felt the judging eyes. Everyone who gossiped, but pretended otherwise, as if the school was ripe with other Mia's.

Everyone was out here.

Except Mia.

Lucretia could bear the Mia-less vista no longer. Heavy guilt shepherded her heavy legs toward Ms. Jackson. She could have claimed to have felt ill—she was, after all, sick with nerves—but opted for a watered-down lie that the hateful teacher would likely deny. “Can I get a drink, Ms. Jackson?” Her voice cracked, supporting her cause.

Ms. Jackson smiled, opened the door, and held it for the stunned Lucretia. She eyed the teacher as she crossed the threshold. The woman indeed appeared to be the same Ms. Jackson who had cradled and cooed the wailing Mia on that day in June; the same Ms. Jackson who glared and yelled at the culpable Lucretia. *Doesn't she remember me?* Lucretia mused. *Doesn't she remember what I did?*

The hard handrail felt like a slippery serpent of electric nerves. With legs of quicksand, she began the long ascent. She caught up to her pounding heart upon reaching the second-floor landing. There, the pair of heavy doors guarded against her, protecting whom she sought. But they were no match for a mousy thumb pressing the latch.

The click of the stairwell door did nothing to interrupt the hushed voices wafting over to her from the opposite side of the hallway. While the volume of the conversation rose with every step toward the only open door, specific words refused to clarify themselves. Still, Lucretia discerned two voices: one she knew, but scarcely heard during class; the other could have belonged to either relief or dread, for Mia's mother was prone to classroom visits between the usual drop-offs and pick-ups—which contributed to the list of gossip topics.

*Please be Mrs. Atwood,* she thought.

Lucretia reached the door, and listened for whether or not she would abort her mission. When her heart, thudding in her ears, skipped a beat, she heard not dread, but relief—*Mrs. Atwood!*—and

turned the corner just as another thought occurred to her: *Mia's mother could still be in there, not talking.*

Two pairs of eyes looked up at her from their respective desks. One pair looked back down just as quickly. The other pair held her gaze. “Hey, Lucretia.” There was a tinge of surprise in Mrs. Atwood's voice. Surprise turned to concern. “You okay?”

Lucretia knew she looked as dishevelled and antsy and nauseous as she felt. “Yeah,” she croaked. “Just...” She couldn't lie about needing a drink; she had passed the fountains on her way over.

“Too hot outside?” Mrs. Atwood offered.

“Yeah,” Lucretia exhaled, relieved for the out.

“Well, you can take your seat if you like. Recess is almost over, anyway. Speaking of...” Mrs. Atwood rose from her desk. “Girls, I'll be right back. Gotta use the ladies' room.” She turned to the damaged thing at the far end of the second-last row, peeling a tangerine. “We'll talk some more about it later, okay, Mia?”

Lucretia wondered if Mrs. Atwood saw the pain, suffering, and sadness that animated Mia's barely nodding head. She wondered if Mrs. Atwood knew that *she* was responsible for those emotions. *Of course, she does*, Lucretia reminded herself. *Mia and her mother and Ms. Jackson for sure told her what I did.*

Mrs. Atwood flashed Lucretia a smile on her way out.

Victim and criminal were alone.

Lucretia remained at the door. Staring at Mia, like the other kids. Talking about her, like the other kids, except her conscience was the mouth, tongue-tied, inarticulate. Her meagre vocabulary boiled down to a single thought: *Just do it, chicken!*

Paring herself from the linoleum, Lucretia shuffled toward the row of desks in a wide arc, simultaneously avoiding and gravitating toward the back row. Her eyes never left Mia, who busied herself with her tangerine. As she drew reluctantly closer, Lucretia was afforded a profile view of the baseball cap—a *major* topic of gossip—that never left Mia's head. Having reached the beginning of the back row, she then trudged the never-ending trudge toward her ill-placed desk at the very end.

Each timid step brought her closer to Mia.

Each fearful step brought her closer to the damned baseball cap... and what it hid.

Each outright terrified step packed more and more of Mia's citrusy snack into her nose.

Standing behind her chair, which sat behind her desk, which sat behind Mia, Lucretia wondered why Mia's mother—who had witnessed the unfortunate seating plan during several of her visits—allowed the criminal so close to her daughter.

Lucretia heard Mia's chewing slow, saw her back stiffen, growing uncomfortably aware of Lucretia's presence, and the lack of chair legs scraping against the floor.

*Chicken! Chicken! CHICKEN!*

She collapsed, rather than sat in, her poorly-assigned seat, and couldn't help but fall into the week-long habit of studying the bit of naked scalp visible under the rim of Mia's baseball cap. She memorized the bony ridges, the shallow pockets, the pronounced point where the skull met the spine, the precise number of pink and red bumps. She knew each of Mia's five beauty-marks intimately, and no matter how many times her eyes played with them, she couldn't settle upon a shape, pattern, or design. She believed that if the school day were longer, she would finally be able to count each terribly short bristle of thin hair.

A fresh burst of tangerine invaded Lucretia's nose. The odour divided itself: southbound, to her stomach, where it mixed with and churned breakfast; northbound, to the mysterious region of the brain

where scent converted to imagery. There, she saw that bright June day, not too dissimilar from the little girl and boy outside. *Did he catch her?* she wondered. *Is she crying?*

*Chicken!* that other part of her taunted.

*What if she doesn't believe me?*

*Chicken!*

*What if she screams and cries again?*

*Chicken!*

*What if she hits me?*

**CHICKEN!**

Another burst of tangerine perspiration. This time Lucretia didn't see the little girl and boy, but another film entirely: the claustrophobic kindergarten playground; Mia clutching the back of her head, bawling in Ms. Jackson's arms; Lucretia trying her best not to join in on the bawling, but failing, trying to give back the long brunette strands of hair wrapped around her stubby fingers; Mia blaring her refusal; Lucretia covering her blubbering face, her snotty nose detecting something flowery, something fruity.

Yet another surge of Mia's tangerine, and Lucretia realized that Mia's envied, rope-like hair had been washed in tangerine-scented shampoo that day in June.

"I'm sorry." Lucretia craved to be heard, perhaps even to be forgiven, and yet she didn't understand why Mia was turning to face her.

"For what?" Mia asked.

Lucretia couldn't believe the question more than the fact Mia was actually talking to her. *Did she forget, too? Like Ms. Jackson? Does her mom remember?*

Mia started to turn away.

The tangerine had completely assimilated with Lucretia's stomach contents, and out came a vomit of sorts: "I'm sorry for pulling your hair and for making you cry and for making all your hair fall out of your head and eyebrows and everyone talking about you and looking at you and not playing with you and making you not want to go outside and play..." As she purged, she saw the most peculiar thing: a smile. Mia had never looked so pretty. Lucretia thought Mia had been pretty on their last day as kindergartners, when she had asked if she'd like to play tag, but this was...

...beauty.

Lucretia sealed her spewing. She noted a sliver of pale orange flesh stuck between Mia's big teeth, somehow enhancing her beautiful smile.

"You didn't pull all my hair out, Luke," Mia said, her voice tickled by a suppressed laugh.

Lucretia—"Luke" to her only friend, Mia—saw two of the girl before her. Both Mia's lost their beautiful smiles as they took Lucretia's hand, and asked her why she was crying.

"I thought I..." Tears drowned the thought. "I thought I pulled out all your hair when we played tag that time."

"No," Mia said, beautiful smile nowhere on her lips. "I was sick."

"Sick? Like a cold?" Lucretia sniffled as if she bore the illness.

"I had leukemia," Mia said, the word somewhat shaky on her tongue.

Lucretia tasted the foreign word. "Lu-Luke-Mia?" She beamed. "Luke-Mia? Like our names?"

Mia smiled another one of her rainbows, tangerine pulp and all. "I never thought of that."

"What's Lu-Luke?"

"Leukemia," Mia corrected. "It's a bad sickness, but I don't got it anymore because the doctor gave me medicine, but the medicine makes your hair fall out. My mom is going to come to class one

day soon, and help me and Mrs. Atwood tell everyone about it.”

On the one hand, Lucretia was relieved to be off the hook. On the other, she now wished *she* had been the cause of Mia's hair loss. “Is that why you don't want to go outside?” The regret of the inquiry came as swiftly as Mia's radiant smile faded.

“I want to, but I can't do too much stuff, like running. I don't like the way the other kids look at me, and stuff.” Now it was Lucretia's turn to wipe *her* duplicate self from Mia's brimming eyes.

The school bell rang, setting off an uproar outside.

Mrs. Atwood returned as if on cue. “You girls okay?” She hadn't noticed the swollen eyes. They smiled. “Mia, all good?” An extra smile from Mia.

Once again, Lucretia was gifted with the back of Mia's baseball-capped head, the way she would remain until the glancing and gossiping kids were summoned outside for more for-granted play. She leaned forward, and whispered each word louder than the next, for the rowdiness was racing up the steps. “If you want, I can play with you outside next recess.” She saw the beauty-marks closest to each of Mia's ears rise ever so slightly, and she knew her friend was smiling.

And though the children were screaming in the hallway—not the bad kind of screaming; not *Mia's* screaming—Lucretia caught Mia's whisper: “Maybe we can play tag.”